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Peace group says 29 freed by 'contras'

Associated Press

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — A spokesman for the activist group Witness for Peace said the 29 Americans allegedly kidnapped by rebels were freed yesterday after a day's captivity and were en route to a town on Lake Nicaragua.

The spokesman said in a telephone interview that the group had reports that its members were aboard a boat on the San Juan River heading toward San Carlos, about 125 miles southeast of Managua. "But you'd better wait until we have a news conference" for more details, he said.

He did not say whether 18 journalists who had been on the boat were still with the group of activists, who had planned a two-day trip on the river as part of a peace vigil.

In San Jose, Costa Rica, government spokesman Armando Vargas said Costa Rican officials flying over the area yesterday afternoon saw the boat traveling without escort on the river, which forms a border between the two nations.

Vargas said that, according to information received at the Costa Rican president's office, the group never entered Costa Rican territory.

The Nicaraguan government had said that rebels, known as *contras*, intercepted the activists' boat on the river 11 miles west of an abandoned rebel camp at La Penca and took the group into Costa Rica.

Witness for Peace and the Nicaraguan government said the Americans, who oppose U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, and the journalists traveling with them were seized Wednesday on the river. They blamed the kidnapping on rebels based in Costa Rica and led by Eden Pastora, a former Sandinista who broke with the Nicaraguan government when it turned toward a Marxist philosophy.

Pastora's group issued a denial late Wednesday from its headquarters in Costa Rica, saying the *contras* had not seen the American group. The *contras* said the kidnapping was a show staged by the Sandinistas.

Both the Nicaraguan government and the peace group issued statements saying they held the U.S. government responsible for the safety of the Americans.

In the peace group's Managua office, member Sharon Hostetter said yesterday that the leader of the "boatride for peace," Warren Armstrong of Wayne, Pa., radioed the office to report that the kidnappers had identified themselves as "an independent anti-communist group of Nicaraguans."

In Washington, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said yesterday that the administration was "working to clarify the situation" of the missing Americans.

Speakes said Washington had asked Nicaragua's and Costa Rica's help to determine the welfare and whereabouts of the group. He noted that since 1983, a State Department travel advisory has warned that the area is dangerous and "frequently included combat operations."

The Reagan administration has praised anti-Sandinista rebels as "freedom fighters," and intelligence sources in Washington say the insurgents have received support from the CIA. Congress in December banned weapons and training sup-

they arrived. The demonstration was organized hours before the announcement that the boat had been spotted on the river.

Nicaragua said the captives included 29 American peace activists and 18 Nicaraguan and foreign journalists. The peace group said radio contacts with the rebels and the captured activists indicated no one was hurt.

In Washington, the peace group released 12 names in what it said was a partial list of abducted journalists. The group said three people were from NBC, four from ABC, one from the New York Daily News, and the rest from publications in Latin America or elsewhere.

The New York Daily News said it had no one assigned to the story and had never heard of the man named by the group as representing the paper. ABC also said its staff members were not involved.

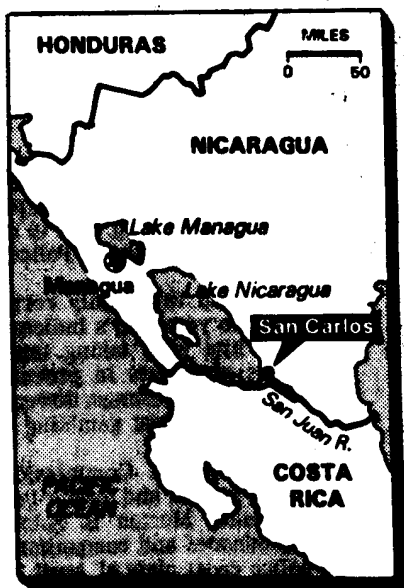
NBC spokesman Andy Freedman confirmed that a crew consisting of NBC cameraman John Basko of Johnstown, Pa., soundman Alexis Tribouard of Argentina and freelance production assistant Juan Caldera had not been heard from.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega visited Witness for Peace's Managua office Wednesday and called the incident "a typical terrorist action executed by mercenaries financed by the North American administration. Therefore, it is in the hands of the United States that these terrorists release the kidnapped people."

Guerrillas of Pastora's Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, known as ARDE, denied they had any contact with the Americans. "The forces of ARDE have not shot at nor have they detained any person," spokesman Jose Davila said in San Jose. He said the incident was "a show mounted by Managua."

Eduardo Sam, an ARDE leader recuperating in Union, N.J., from injuries he suffered in a helicopter crash, said ARDE forces were about 20 miles from where the incident occurred.

Witness for Peace members made the trip despite a warning from Pastora that his guerrillas would attack them. Pastora said Witness for Peace is politically motivated and is working against Reagan's Central American policy.



port for the *contras*

In San Carlos, local Sandinista authorities organized schoolchildren and teachers for a demonstration yesterday at dockside to welcome the members of Witness for Peace when